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Dancing in the Air, Standing Out at Sea: An Analysis of *Nalukataq*, the Blanket Toss

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Photo: Ash Adams

Abstract

This paper is a movement analysis of the blanket toss (*nalukataq*), an event currently manifested at the World Eskimo Indian Olympics (WEIO). First, I examine the tradition's history and development over time as portrayed in scholarly literature on the Iñupiat whale festival. Then, I examine the blanket toss as one of many Iñupiat and Alaska Native games sharing common characteristics. Finally, I investigate the blanket toss as a WEIO competitive event, now shifted from its original site specificity and traditional context. In particular, I look at the essential components of a successful toss as defined by WEIO criteria, employing a phenomenological approach in my analysis in order to focus on the primacy of realization and reveal the ways in which aspects of the modern competitive performance may embody traditional Alaska Native cultures and values.

Nalukataq

After a successful whale hunting season, Iñupiat people in northern Alaska turn to celebration. Usually coinciding with the summer solstice, this festival is often referred to as *Nalukataq*, but otherwise known as the “Whale Feast.” This multi-day event also involves special clothes, gift distribution, and dancing (Turner, 1993). As a ritual, the festival honors the whales, ensures their return, and brings attention to the men who capture them and the women who process them (Fair, 2000).

The Whale Feast is most famously characterized by what is popularly known as the “blanket toss”, hence the festival is often referred to by the same name as its main event (Fair, 2000), with *nalukataq* sometimes translated as “dancing in the air” (Levy Zumwalt, 1987, p. 269). The blanket toss requires thirty or more “pullers” who stretch a large reinforced skin, usually that of bearded seal. A “jumper” then goes to the center of the skin to be sent twenty to forty feet (6-9 meters) into the air (Johnston, 1975, p. 3). The often repeated popular claim is that this practice stems from an ancient technique of sending agile hunters with good eyesight into the air using a skin blanket so that they could sight game, such as herds of caribou across the flat landscape, or whales entering the leads in the ice.

In contemporary times, the blanket toss is performed as a celebratory ritual within the context of the festival, for the sheer joy of it, and as a competitive event (discussed forthcoming). In his 1975 preliminary study of “Alaskan Eskimo” dance, ethnomusicologist Thomas F. Johnston describes the event not as the “blanket toss” but as the “skin-toss dance” as it is traditionally accompanied by special dance songs (1975, p. 51) and followed by dances, all occurring on the same grounds, which are defined and set up specifically for the event (Johnston, 1991, and Zumwalt, 1987). According to anthropologist Rosemary Levy Zumwalt (1987), to dance is to honor the whale, so it is traditional for hunters and captains to jump, as well as women who have given birth to a son within the year. She claims that the blanket toss is the most important symbolic element at the whale festival, and speculates that it may represent purification by air, after the process of birth in the case of recent mothers, or after contact with the powerful spirit of the whale as in the case of captains and hunters (pp. 266-169).

Although *Nalukataq* is deeply rooted in traditional beliefs, the blanket toss is now widely viewed as a secular event (Johnston, 1975, p. 4), and realizations vary. In some instances, the tossed person will hold a bag from which they will shower gifts upon those below (Johnston, 1991, p. 51). In former times, these gifts were provided by the successful whaling captain, based on the requests of villagers (Johnston, 1991, p. 51). The tossed person may also fling candy from the height of the toss for the elders to gleefully collect (Turner, pp. 102-105).

If skilled enough, sometimes the jumpers will simply somersault to delight those looking on, or perform other tricks (Turner, p. 105). One tradition involves the tossed person passing an inflated sealskin poke (bag) over the head and under the feet without letting go or losing balance (Johnston, 1975, p. 4).

In addition to demonstrations of the blanket toss at the “Whale Feast,” as well as at Alaskan festivals, fairs, and cultural events, for both indigenous and non-indigenous audiences, it is a spectator favorite at the World Eskimo Indian Olympics (WEIO), held

annually in Fairbanks, Alaska. Since its beginning in 1961, each year the WEIO has drawn increasing crowds, who drive and fly in from various parts of the state, as well as some from outside Alaska. Today, the WEIO is a non-profit organization whose annual event spans four days each summer. Alongside the physical games are other competitive events demonstrating traditional skills as well as dance group performances (Weio.org, 2015). Testing pain endurance is a common characteristic of Iñupiat games such as the majority of those at the WEIO (Johnston, 1991, p. 61). For example, games such as the “Ear Weight” test one’s ability to cope with frostbite. Others test general strength, physical fitness, balance, and agility, such as the “Kneel Jump”, which also tests the quickness and control one needs to navigate sea ice during “break up” season, and the “Eskimo Stick Pull” and “Arm Pull” which also test the above but with the idea of pulling a seal from a hole in the ice (Weio.org, 2015). As Johnston (1991) explains: “Despite the considerable discomfort experienced by participants in these competitive Eskimo games, fortitude must be displayed. Formerly, it served the function of an arduous rite of passage, coping with which indicated readiness to undertake the hardships of the hunt” (p.61).

The WEIO blanket toss

The WEIO blanket toss event is currently held in a large indoor sports facility alongside the other games, with men and women competing in separate divisions and each division consisting of a preliminary and a final round. For the blanket toss, 30-50 volunteer pullers grasp handles sewn into the skin blanket, and each contestant is allowed three jumps per round, which factor into an average score. It is noted on the WEIO website that judges consider balance, height and style in the air, with all-around form and grace determining the winner (Weio.org, 2015). But what do these terms mean, according to the emic perspective? In interior Fairbanks, the sea is far from sight even without the rounded ceiling of the gymnasium, and while whaling is still carried out in Alaska, this ritual is foreign to many contestants hailing from Anchorage, Wasilla, and other urban, predominately non-Native cities. Divorced from ritual and site specificity, how does the blanket toss maintain its sense of place and tradition, decolonizing the gymnasium? Without gifts or candy to be distributed, what in particular is of value for participants in this event, and how can this game be understood within the context of the others occurring alongside it?

As a graduate student of dance ethnology, my analysis was framed in the context of a European graduate program course assignment which required the use of movement analysis from a video source along with the application of one theoretical method in order to answer my questions. As such, I reviewed a number of available online videos from previous years’ WEIO events. I also contacted the videographer to ensure that I correctly understood the process of the games as portrayed via film. For my analysis in this essay, I selected the men’s event from the most recent available year, 2014 (YouTube, 2015), and I decided to take a phenomenological approach while reviewing the footage. While phenomenology usually supposes full and live experience rather than a video analysis, I felt that this process of phenomenology would be best suited to help me to understand this event from my place as an outsider. Nonetheless, it must be stated that my analysis is of course grounded in pictorial consciousness, meaning that it is mediated by images.

Using time as a frame of reference, and using a chart, I noted what happened as the 2014 competition unfolded, as I perceived it. I noted *form* in preparation for the jump and in the air, *height* using the gymnasium's mezzanine as a frame of reference, *style* at the apex of the toss, and *landing*. I also noted the jumper's reaction and the collective audience and puller reaction, as it was interpretable. For the preliminary round, only one jump per jumper is included in the video. In the finals round, all three jumps from the five jumpers are shown, after which the winners are named and ranked in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd places. I also created a collection of screen shots showing the pose at the apex of jumps referred to within my analysis.

The next step in my analysis was to investigate the general essences of what I perceived. I noticed is that most jumpers took off with slightly spread and bent legs, using a "skiing" motion of the arms. Some jumpers did nothing distinguishable or remarkable to me in the air, while others did 360-degree rotations of their bodies or somersaults, and many jumpers struck some kind of pose. Most jumpers flailed their arms or legs at some point (not to be confused with running in place). Some jumpers dressed in traditional clothing in the preliminaries, but in the final round, all of the jumpers wore either a *kuspuk*, *mukluks*, or both. Most jumpers immediately expressed thanks to the pullers through a round of low fives.

The following step in my analysis was to try to apprehend essential relationships among these essences. The first connections I made pertained to the stylistic choices the jumpers made. The poses the jumpers struck appeared to be mimetic, in line with Iñupiat dance aesthetic (Johnston, 1976, p. 438). I put these poses into three categories, defined by how they were immediately recognizable and deemed similar: "skater," "sighter," and "hunter." In the first pose, which appears three times, the jumper tucks his legs and grabs both feet with one hand while stretching the other arm out, a pose that resembles the way skateboarders grab their board with one hand and balance themselves with the other while "catching air" on a ramp. The second pose, seen two times by the same jumper, I called "hunter," as the jumper appears to be lancing a harpoon or arrow. The last pose, which appears four times by two different jumpers, I named "sighter," as this pose involves the jumper raising one hand to his brow as if shielding his eyes from "the sun" while looking into the distance.

My next task was to watch modes of appearing, which is to examine the way in which my thoughts came to me. The two poses which seemed to have cultural significance within the historical context of *nalukataq*, "sighter" and "hunter," reminded me of sighting game, the original purpose for the blanket toss as a survival technique, and hunting them, the successful result of which is the reason for the *nalukataq* ritual and celebratory toss. It would seem at this stage of the analysis that these poses, perhaps combined with traditional dress, may be the answer to my question about what is of value for participants in today's WEIO blanket toss, what may decolonize the space and bring a sense of place and tradition to this contextually unnecessary act.

This, of course, is only immediately obvious to me as an Alaskan with some insider knowledge. Another interpreter without this contextual background may come to different conclusions. And as I reflect on the way that this idea has rooted itself in my consciousness, I realize that, as a non-Native from Wasilla, my understanding is likely based on a framework

that is perhaps unsuitable for analyzing this event. As Clifford Geertz (1976) reminds us in “Art as a Cultural System”:

If we are to have a semiotics of art (or for that matter, of any sign system not axiomatically self-contained), we are going to have to engage in a kind of natural history of signs and symbols, an ethnography of the vehicles of meaning. Such signs and symbols, such vehicles of meaning, play a role in the life of a society, or some part of a society, and it is that which in fact gives them their life. (p. 1489)

Do these culturally significant poses constitute what defines “balance,” “form,” “grace,” and “style” in this context? When reexamining my chart, I can see clearly that the only pose the top-ranking jumper performed was “skater.” I double-checked my visual interpretation with one of the jumpers appearing in the film, whom I contacted. He later confirmed my initial interpretation: “no significance, just looks cool” (Kyle Worl, 2015, Personal Communication, 30 October). Confronted with this information from my informant, Geertz might argue that I am not correctly engaging in ethnographic analysis. Perhaps I am missing something lurking on the peripheral areas of my consciousness. Perhaps I have been stuck in Western ideas about “dancing” only as flamboyant, virtuosic motion, each of these poses a snapshot of which, conveniently suited to my Western “picture frame” aesthetic.

Fortunately, the next step of the analysis is to suspend my beliefs in existence, which is to bracket these preconceived notions and instead focus on what is observed. It can be tempting to get lost in the immediate interpretation of a performance, leaving behind the performance itself. As ethnochoreologists Egil Bakka and Gendiminas Karoblis (2010) put it, “[T]he idea of a *dance* would be a dangerous path that may lead a dance critic into judgements that were too far from the realized dances” (p. 178).

Now that I am focusing on the primacy of realization, what is most striking to me is that the top two jumpers always landed standing, in both the preliminaries and the finals. The third ranking jumper fell once in the finals, onto his rear, and stumbled only slightly in the preliminaries. The top jumpers also flailed the least, and they consistently reached heights within or above the mezzanine. The other two jumpers in the final round, who did not rank, each reached below or within the mezzanine in height only, and each fell once, both on their whole bodies. Jumpers who fell always got up instantaneously. I also noticed that the audience began to cheer as each jumper reached the apex of his jump, with louder cheers coming at higher heights, but they also reacted very quickly to a fall with either immediate silence or a collective sigh of concern, and they cheered loudest following a standing landing. Most jumpers also visibly expressed disappointment if they fell. I see clearly now that the height and landings are crucial factors, perhaps the most crucial. Contemplating these factors, Kyle Worl, the jumper I contacted, responded to some of my inquiries:

As for what makes a good jump, it seems landing is the most important aspect. Even if one attempts a difficult move like a spin or flip, if they don't land it then there seems to be significant points deducted. I've been told they also judge on height and style. Height is mostly determined by the 50 or so pullers and size of blanket, but the more comfortable and experienced the jumper is then the higher the pullers will attempt to throw the jumper. I believe style can mean a lot of things, such as grace in the air, comfortableness of the jumper, the difficulty or uniqueness of a trick, the type

of trick and whether it has cultural significance, attitude of the jumper (like smiling, making seal calls or engaging the pullers), and I've always been told to wear a kuspuk while jumping, so appearance seems to play in as well. Usually the men that get first place land all of their jumps and do one or more graceful back flips" (2015, Personal Communication, 29 October).

Interpretation

At this final stage of my analysis, I may interpret meanings. After much reflection, I propose that in addition to honoring the spirit of the whale, the blanket toss may also represent a test of one's ability to withstand the hardships of the hunt. But perhaps more importantly, the toss serves to reinforce communal values among participants, and these two things together bring to it a sense of place and tradition in line with other Iñupiat games.

As dance researcher Sondra Fraleigh (1991) reminds readers about human movement, "[A]esthetic intent implicates intrinsic values which are inherent in actions, be they appreciated for their beauty or some other affective quality" (p. 14). It seemed clear to me that beauty was not the primary factor motivating a high score. While the beautiful, creative, and culturally significant poses a jumper strikes are interesting and may fit into the category of "style," along with other aspects including traditional dress, I suggest that the test of hardship is the affective quality that actually constitutes the "balance," "form," and "grace" that are essential to a successful toss. This test has two major components: height and landing.

First, the higher the height, the better the sight, but more importantly, the more fear one should feel and the more risk of injury to the jumper as the toss may be errant and the pullers negligent. Levy Zumwalt (1987) describes the "screams of terror" as "amusing" to the onlookers of the tosses she observed in Point Hope (p. 269). Obviously, none of the young men in the WEIO competition screamed, but among the top ranking contestants, the winner flailed the least, which can be interpreted as remaining calm. This is how "form," "grace," and "balance" factor into height. Additionally, as noted by Kyle Worl, the jumper I contacted, comfortable jumpers are thrown higher by the pullers, so the ability to remain calm directly affects one's ability to jump higher.

Secondly, landing makes or breaks a toss, although the WEIO does not specifically state landing on one's feet as essential, but only as a recommendation (Weio.org, 2015). In her observation of the event based on her fieldwork in Point Hope from 1987-1988, anthropologist Edith Turner (1993) does not state the importance of landing on one's feet explicitly, but she does mention that when she was invited to be tossed, she "disgraced" herself by "falling over" (p. 105). Levy Zumwalt describes the falls and stumbles that she observed in her fieldwork in Point Hope in 1981 as resulting in laughter from the onlookers. However, she also notes that the blanket toss appears to replicate life at sea: "The individual on the blanket is in danger of possible upset," she writes, "a situation which certainly exists in the sea hunt" (p. 272). Additionally, Levy Zumwalt reminds us that the tossing blanket is made of the same skin which makes the *umiak*, the boat that takes the hunters to sea (p. 272),

and Turner describes the human-made waves of the toss of the blanket resembling those of the sea (p. 112). As such, developing superior balance is essential preparation for the hardships of the hunt, as also demonstrated in other games. According to my analysis of the WEIO blanket toss, when a jumper falls or stumbles, the toss does not appear to be otherwise redeemed, even with great height, graceful form, and a culturally significant, well-struck pose. Similarly, if a boat capsizes, from the force of the waves or the whales themselves, and if the hunter or hunters are unable to successfully right it, their hunt or perhaps their lives could be lost, which may have a negative impact on the family and community.

Yet another way in which site specificity and tradition may be found when the primacy of the realization is examined — the construction of the act itself — is perhaps the most symbolically powerful of all. In 2014, and in this competitive environment, the skin blanket is not set to a machine to spring each jump in the same way, which would level the playing field for each contestant. Instead, it is still carried out with volunteer human springs, a collective effort requiring the constant interaction and negotiation of timing, not unlike the cooperation required to hunt successfully as a group, or succeed in any other aspect of communal life. As Levy Zumwalt stresses, “it is the individual tossed in jubilant jest by the members of the community” (p. 272). Thus the rhythm of the jump is transmitted from the group to the jumper, and this serves to reinforce communal values among all involved. Similarly, Johnston (1975) describes the goal or idea of Eskimo dancing as “community cohesion expressed in communication between dancers and audience” (p. 4). Even in a large gymnasium in the comparatively urban setting of Fairbanks, the values of communal village life are retained in this act. The pullers are not secondary supports to the jumper, they are essential to his or her success. In an opinion piece about the experience of making a blanket for tossing while coming to terms with the affects drug and alcohol abuse in his community, Iñupiat Greg Nothstine reflects on the spirit of the blanket toss as “a reflection of harmony in action,” extending beyond the toss and its historical context. In the individual’s vulnerable moment, be it the exhilarating fear of the toss on the blanket, that of being tossed at sea, or in the navigation of the challenges many Native communities face, it is the community who ensures that the individual has both a good orientation and “a safe place to land” (Nothstine, n.d.).

Conclusion

The steps of my analysis led me to a conclusion other than what I expected, but nonetheless full of potential for further contemplation. The blanket toss is but one performative event among many, a competition only one context, and the WEIO is only one several competitions. However, such a project would require live observation, which may entail a long-term effort, as the blanket toss is not a sport which can be easily practiced, and for many contestants, the annual competitive performance represents their only fully-fledged training complete with a blanket and pullers. Furthermore, additional perspectives of Native peoples would undoubtedly enrich this work. Yet it is clear that these fleeting moments of athleticism, exhilaration, and embodied cultural values, dancing in the air and standing out at sea, are rich with layers of significance and relevance.

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